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Influence of employer-employee relationships on service quality in the hospitality industry in Nakuru County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Employees are the backbone of the hospitality industry, and the people in service are inseparable from the service they provide. This research investigated the influence of employer-employee relationships on service quality in the hospitality industry in Nakuru County, Kenya. Descriptive design was used to gather both quantitative and qualitative data through the use of questionnaires and interview guide as the key informants. The target population was 73 respondents comprising of 55 employees' operational employees and 18 supervisors at Nuru Palace and the Legacy Hotel in Nakuru County. The findings also reveal that coaching and mentorship as well as mutual trust between employees and their superiors affect service quality positively. The study recommends that hospitality establishments should facilitate more on the job training and provide technical support to their employees. They should also work on establishing trust between the management and the workforce.

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Introduction

The hospitality industry has been among the largest and fastest-growing industries across the globe. In India, the growth rate has been noted in the past decade to increase at a rate of 8% per annum between 2007 and 2016. In Africa, a report by Pricewaterhouse Coopers reveals an expansion in the hospitality sector, where an increase in hotel revenue is expected to grow by 7.4% by the year 2022. The industry is noted to be among the largest sources of foreign exchange in Kenya (Ndivo & Manyara, 2018).

In Kenya, hospitality is a key part of the Kenyan economy contributing an average of 10% to the country's gross domestic product. According to the Hospitality Outlook report 2017-2021, Kenya was among the fastest-growing markets Africa in 2018 with an occupancy increase of 14.6% and a room revenue increase of 28%. Kenya's hotel stock is set to grow by the addition of 13 new hotels within the decade. These new properties, which will grow by 2,400 guestrooms, will expand Kenya's hotel capacity by 13 percent. According to the Hospitality Outlook report, the number of available guestrooms will rise at a compound annual increase of 2.5 percent from 18,600 in 2016 to 21,000 in 2021 (Hospitality Outlook, 2019).

The competitiveness of the hospitality industry is largely dependent on its ability to deliver services that are superior to those of competing nations. Hotel businesses globally are putting more emphasis on customer satisfaction as a critical factor for organizational success (Wambua, 2014). On the other hand, the quality of services delivered in hotels rises and falls on the organization's workforce. Success is determined by how well a hotel sells customer experience to their target customers better than the competitor within the same market (Rajini, 2016). In the case of differentiation of services, efforts are put to meet and exceed customer expectations. This is done by laying emphasis on robust qualitative services to secure and sustain high customer demand. Ideally, hotels rely on satisfaction, loyalty, and positive word of mouth from their customers in order to gain a competitive edge over their competitors. These features are a shadow of good employee performance, which translates to high-quality services.

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It is, therefore, the employee that is the chief piece of the puzzle to ensure this strategy is applied with efficacy. Organizations that are engaging their employees effectively are more likely to sustain their skills, experience, and motivation, with the results leading to high service quality. Aktar (2017), states that employee engagement, particularly for service organizations, is more critical as the level of engagement highly depends on the job-related factors such as human resource management. Employee engagement can be defined as the general positive attitude of an employee about one's work and the organization (Han, 2015).

Engagement constitutes feelings of the staff towards their organization's work climate, leaders, and the overall work experience. The workforce's emotional investment fuels their drive to surpass the expectations and targets set by their superiors. Employee engagement is notably a game-changer in organizational performance, consequently leading to productivity, profitability, customer satisfaction, and loyalty (Sohail, 2007). One of way in which modern organization choose to engage their employees in by cultivate good relationship between employees and the employer (Chaurasia & Shukla, 2013; Radstaak, 2017). Due to the gradual growth in the hospitality industry, major challenges associated with managing the human resources have mushroomed.

Before expansion in the hotel industry, the workforce, in general, was relatively easy to manage due to low costs associated with the business. On the contrary, an increase in demand has placed a considerably high level of expectation on the employee to meet the desired service quality by their customers and leaders (Han, 2015). This expectation threatens to take a toll on the relationship between employees and employers leading to disengagement, lack of commitment and a general decline in performance (Abukhalifeh, 2013). Despite this reality, little attention has been directed towards investigating the employer-employee relationship in the hospitality industry and how its influences service quality. This study sought to fill the gap in knowledge by investigated the influence of employer-employee relationship on service quality in the hospitality industry in Nakuru County, Kenya.

Literature Review

Theoretical Background

The Gap Model describes service quality as the gap between the customer's expected service and the perception of the actual delivered service by the employee (Mola, 2011). It suggests that service quality is mainly contributed by positive relations between the service providers and the customers. It is established when the service provider knows the client's expectations. This helps in delivering precise quality defined by the customer's expectation. The underpinning factors affecting service quality would include staff sociability, usefulness, attentiveness, response, effectiveness, and capacity to make sound decisions. All these factors are a reflection of an engaged staff member. The results of an engaged workforce include employee enthusiasm, relentlessness, flexibility, and devoted attention toward the task at hand. With the competitive environment within the hotel industry, quality service has become crucial in creating a competitive advantage (Borgave, 2012).

The SERVQUAL model suggests five aspects of assessing performance in the delivery of service (Pakurar, Haddad, Naggy, Popp, & Olah, 2019). The five dimensions are: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility (Borgave, 2012). Reliability involves the employees' capacity to deliver services as promised to the consumer with efficacy (Pakurar et al., 2019). It is the ability of a service to be delivered with accuracy and within the first trial. Responsiveness describes the delivery of the service with deliberate promptness, applying courtesy, and being sensitive to the customer's every need. It focuses on timekeeping, commitment, and devotion to customers' requests.

Assurance is embodied by the employee's ability to spur confidence and trust to the customer (Borgave, 2012). This is done through the application of knowledge, observing courtesy and professionalism. Tangibility is concerned with the outward appearance of the physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel within the organization (Pakurar, 2019). When technology and communication materials for instance are of high standards, the customers may have a positive image of the organization as holding high standards of service. Lastly, empathy describes the customer's desire to feel prioritized and that their needs are recognized with emotional value (Borgave, 2012). This aspect demands a demonstration of care, personalization, and providing special attention to the customer's requests. Empathy leaves a customer feeling special, unique, and that their services were customized specifically for them, thus perceiving the organization has high-quality service.

Empirical Literature Review

The dynamics of the employer-employee relationship has shifted from the old way of thinking, where the employees are followers and the supervisors are their leaders (Chaurasia & Shukla, 2013). The quality of the relationship between the employer and employee decides the degree of engagement of an employee in their work roles. High LMX (Leader-member exchange) influences effective subordinate work behaviours through the intervening process of employee engagement. Radstaak (2017) argues that a high-quality leader-employee relationship has a direct effect on levels of employee engagement with development opportunities and social support available.

The employer-employee relationship within an organization setting is considered among the top priorities (Chaurasia & Shukla, 2013). The managers and supervisors are in recent times considered servant-leaders, who create an enabling environment for their subordinates rather than the typical "boss" as recognized in the past era, using their power to control staff. Empowerment of staff is becoming a key component in organizational performance, where leaders are more relational by providing support, mentorship, and coaching translating to an engaged workforce (Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019). By leader empowering their employees, aspects such

as job satisfaction, commitment towards their jobs, and the organization, in general, are incentivized. Good relations between superiors and their subordinates enable a culture of trust, where employees feel free to express their requests and grievances because they are listened to (Brown, Gray, McHardy & Taylor, 2015). They possess a sense of value and worth, and they feel affiliated with the organization, stimulating commitment in the tasks. Trust within an organization affects the organizational structure, the level of communication, job satisfaction, and commitment of the employees (Sawithri, Nishanthi, & Amarasinghe, 2017). Mutual respect and trust are established by creating an environment of openness and transparency between employees and their superiors.

Trust is also stimulated by the organization's leaders offering support to the employees both technically and psychologically, by which employees feel the obligation to respect for their leaders (Shaheen, 2017). Job support registers psychological perception of safety which is important in stimulating loyalty and commitment. The quality of employer-employee relationship is also a function of the effectiveness of communication between the two. Honesty and openness in internal communication elicit feelings of value and affiliation that spur engagement (Balakrishnan & Masthan, 2013). Internal communication should embrace a two-way flow of information between organizational leadership and the workforce. The exchange of information should be done through different channels not limited to memos, emails, surveys, and corporate newsletters.

Research and Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive research design. The study was conducted at Nuru Palace Hotel and The Legacy Hotel located in Nakuru Town East Constituency, Nakuru County. It targeted the population 73 employees in the two hotels comprising 55 operational staffs and 18 supervisors. Quantitative data was collected from the operational staff using structured questionnaires while qualitative data was collected from the supervisors using interviews. The quantitative data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics using the SPSS software. Qualitative data was analysed using the content analysis technique.

Results and Discussion

About 52.7% of the respondents were male while female accounted for 47.3% of the study population. Most of the respondents (43.6%) had the secondary level of education while 41.8% had a tertiary college certificate. Over 80% of the respondents had worked in their organizations for more than 2 years and thus were privy to information relating to the organization practices and how they affect service quality.

Influence of Employer-Employee Relationships on Service Quality

The dependent variable of the study was service quality which was measured using three indicators namely empathy, responsiveness, and reliability. The independent variable was employer-employee relationship, which was measured in terms of mentorship & coaching, communication and trust. In this study, the term employer was used to refer to the senior managers in the hotel who act as agents of the hotel owners.

Influence of Mentorship & Coaching on Service Quality

The study theorized that mentorship and coaching is one of the elements of employer-employee relationship is that bound to have an influence on service quality. To assess mentorship, respondent was asked to respond to the statement that "Employees are mentored by hotel management?" using a "Yes" or "No" response. To assess service quality, respondents were asked to answer the question: "We always deliver our promises to our clients" using a "Yes" or "No" response. The responses to the two questions were cross-tabulated as shown in Table 1:

Table1: Relationship between Employee Mentorship & Coaching and Reliability

			We always deliver our promises to our clients		
			Yes	No	Total
Employees are mentored by hotel management?	Yes	Number	13	15	28
		Percentages	46.4%	53.6%	100.0%
	No	Number	12	15	27
		Percentages	44.4%	55.6%	100.0%
	Total	Number	25	30	55
		Percentages	45.5%	54.5%	100.0%

Research data (2020)

From the findings above, 15 respondents who indicated they are not mentored by the hotel management said they are not able to deliver their promises to their clients, accounting for 55.6%, while 13 respondents who indicated they are mentored by the hotel management said they can deliver their promise to their clients, accounting for 46.4%. Therefore, it can be seen that the employees are not able to deliver their promises to their clients due to them not being mentored by the hotel management. This has been supported by the supervisors who indicated that the employees are not often trained. Furthermore, they highlighted that the training is done internally or they train themselves and this rarely happens. Also, the training is not conducted by external trainers. Kiprono (2016) mentions that mentorship can be a useful tool for meeting the needs of the organization, for managing change and for achieving positive outcomes on employee performance. Therefore, insufficient mentorship activities in an organization are linked with poor performance by the employees in delivering their services to the customers.

Influence of Communication on Service Quality

Communication was the second employer-employee relationship element that was deemed to have an impact on quality of service. To assess communication, participants were asked to respond to question: “Is there effective communication between the employees and the hotel management?” using a “Yes” or “No” response. Service quality was assessed by asking participants to respond to the statement: “We are always quick in responding to our customers’ requests,” using a “Yes” or “No” answer. The responses to the two queries were cross tabulated as shown in Table 2:

Table 2: Relationship between Communication and Service Quality

			We are always quick in responding to our customers’ requests		
			Yes	No	Total
Is there effective communication between the employees and the hotel management?	Yes	Number	9	26	35
		Percentages	25.7%	74.3%	100.0%
	No	Number	6	14	20
		Percentages	30.0%	70.0%	100.0%
	Total	Number	15	40	55
		Percentages	27.3%	72.7%	100.0%

Research data (2020)

From the findings above, 26 respondents who indicated that despite having good communication within the organization, they are still not able to respond quickly to the customers’ requests, accounting for 74.3%; whereas 6 of the respondents who indicated there is no effective communication, they were still able to respond quickly to the customer needs, accounting for 30%. It can be seen despite having good communication between them and their superiors, the employees are not able to respond quickly to the customers’ requests. The supervisors agreed that there is good communication between the management and the staff. However, it was noted that communication still needs improvement, pinpointing communication from employees to management is below average. Therefore, it can be concluded there are underlying issues concerning communication between staff and management, especially in terms of adhering to their concerns. This can as well lead to the employees’ failure to consistently respond to their customers’ requests.

Influence of Trust on Service Quality

The final element of employer-employee relationship to be examined was trust. This was assessed by requesting participants to respond to the statement “There is mutual trust between employees and hotel management,” using a “Yes” or “No” answer. Service quality was measured by asking respondent to respond to the statement: “We have our customers’ best interest at heart,” using a “Yes” or “No” answer. The responses to the two statements were cross-tabulated as showed in Table 3.

Table 3: Relationship between trust and empathy

		We have our customers' best interest at heart		
		Yes	No	Total
There is mutual trust between employees Yes and hotel management	Yes			
	Number	24	14	38
	Percentages	63.2%	36.8%	100.0%
	No			
	Number	13	4	17
	Percentages	76.5%	23.5%	100.0%
	Total			
	Number	37	18	55
	Percentages	67.3%	32.7%	100.0%

Research data (2020)

From the findings above, 24 of the respondents who indicated that there was mutual trust said they had the customers' interest at heart, accounting for 63.2%, while 13 respondents who indicated that there was no mutual trust indicated that they still had customers' interest at heart, accounting for 76.5%. It can be concluded that there is mutual trust between the hotel management and employees, which in turn leads to them having the customers' interest at heart. This has been supported by the supervisors who indicated there is some level of trust between the staff and the management, notwithstanding there is some room for improvement. They noted that there is a need for the management to be more receptive to employees' requests and listen to their grievances. Regardless of this shortcoming, however, it does not hinder the employees from having their customers' interest at heart. This concurs with a study by McManus & Mosca, (2015), which states that an organization possessing a working environment that is built on trust yields better results, responds better to the dynamics of the environment, and the employees achieve high levels of job satisfaction. Therefore, trust between supervisors and their subordinates' influences the delivery of quality services to their customers.

Conclusions

The study sought to determine the relationship between employer-employee relationship and service quality. The findings reveal that 55.6% of the employees are not able to deliver their promises to their clients due to them not being mentored and coached sufficiently by the hotel management. Therefore, mentorship and coaching activities of employees are connected to them delivering their promises to clients consistently; where in this case inadequate mentorship and coaching activities affect service quality negatively. Hotels that train their staff members invest to expand their potential to better handle customers with skill and tact. Thus, the results would be that the employees are equipped professionally, leaving the customer feeling that the organization is reliable; an aspect of service quality.

Additionally, it emerged from the findings that 55.6% of the employees are not able to consistently respond quickly to the customers' requests promptly despite having good communication between them and their superiors. This tends to contradict what the supervisor indicated, that there is good communication. However, this does not translate to consistent quick response to the customers' requests, therefore it can be concluded there are underlying issues hindering service quality in terms of employee consistency in responding to customers' requests promptly.

Lastly, the findings also brought to light that 63.2% of the employees agree that there is mutual trust between the hotel management, and employees do have the customers' best interest at heart. This has been supported by the supervisors who indicated that some level of trust exists within the organizations, albeit there is still pending room for improvement. They noted that there is a need for the management to be more receptive to employees' requests and listen to their grievances. An environment of trust between the staff members and their superiors assures the employees that they are respected, valued and their efforts are valued in the hotel. Thus, they feel obligated to assert themselves in ensuring the organization's success through impeccable response rate during customer service, ensuring customer satisfaction through the interpretation of high service quality.

The study thus concludes that mentorship and coaching as employer activities and mutual trust between staff members and their superiors affect the delivery of quality service. Consequently, the study recommends that hotels in Nakuru County should work on establishing trust between the management and the workforce by ensuring a culture of honesty, fairness, and openness. Policies should be implemented that facilitate an environment built on trust and mutual respect. Hotels should also facilitate more on the job training and provide technical support to their employees. This will help in establishing job satisfaction within their workforce.

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